

Oxford University: A Brief Explanation of Traditional Aspects in College Life

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オックスフォード大学における伝統的な大学生活

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The University of Oxford is one of the oldest and most prestigious universities in the world. The high quality of education has produced many important people in various fields of excellence. In proportion to its long history, many traditions started in the university. Some of them became the standard for other universities or colleges around the world. In this short paper, I would like to introduce some of the traditions in college life in the medieval town Oxford. I will mention in particular historical buildings and ceremonial clothing. I will focus on Exeter College and Brasenose College as examples out of the 38 colleges that make up Oxford University.

Keywords: Oxford University, college, tradition, campus life

1 Introduction: History

The University of Oxford in the United Kingdom is the third oldest university in the world according to Chris Day, Emeritus Fellow at Kellogg College in the University¹⁾. Although the precise year of foundation is not clear, it is believed that its long history began in 1096 when ‘teaching existed at Oxford in some form’²⁾. In 1167, King Henry II banned English students from studying at the University of Paris and they migrated to Oxford³⁾. This resulted in the development of the University. Today the University of Oxford is made up of 38 colleges. Over the course of its 900-year history, the University has developed many unique traditions and some of them have been appropriated by other universities or colleges around the world. In this short paper, I would like to introduce some of the traditional aspects in college life in Oxford. I will concentrate on Exeter College and Brasenose College where I stayed in 2013 and 2014 respectively to participate in a two-week summer course for English teachers.

2 Oxford University and its Colleges

The Educational System in the University of Oxford is unique. It is a ‘federation’ of 38 individual colleges in the city of Oxford and ‘each college has its own tutors, administrators, grounds, residence halls and traditions’⁴⁾. This is often compared to the relationship between the federal government and the state governments in the United States⁵⁾.

Students apply for individual colleges and the tutorial is given by tutors there, while degrees are given by the University at degree ceremonies at the Sheldonian Theatre. The tutorial at the college is ‘a one-hour meeting between one or two students and the tutor’. They meet once a week or every other week. Tutors do not ‘feed you facts and information’ but ‘guide your studies’⁶⁾. It follows that you need to be a more independent learner and are more responsible for your own study in Oxford University than in many other universities.

In addition to the tutorial at your college, you can also attend weekly lectures at the faculty which are given for any students in the University so that you can complement your study at the college. Students take exams at the Examination Schools instead of at their college (see Figure 1). This building is located on High Street. Two security

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Figure 1: The Examination Schools

guards stand at the entrance. I will mention how students must dress for exams in Section 4.4.

The main library in Oxford University is the Bodleian Library. It is the second largest library in the United Kingdom⁷⁾. It includes the Divinity School, Duke Humfrey's Library, the Radcliffe Camera (Figure 2) and the New Bodleian Library. A unique tradition in this library is that you cannot borrow books. Even King Charles was not allowed to borrow a book in 1645. If you are a student, all you can do is to read a book in the reading room in the library. Unfortunately, visitors are not allowed to access any of the numerous valuable books that are to be found in the library.

3 Exeter College and Brasenose College

Let us have a closer look at two colleges here: Exeter College and Brasenose College (see Figures 3 and 4). Exeter College, which is one of the oldest colleges in Oxford University, was established in 1314 and became 700 years old in 2014. Brasenose College, which is just across the street from Exeter, was founded in 1509. I would like to compare these colleges where I studied and stayed for a short period of time.

Each college in Oxford University has its own private property which includes the chapel, the library, the dining hall, lecture rooms, halls of residence, and gardens. It is interesting that colleges differ from each other in many ways.



Figure 2: The Radcliffe Camera

Let us compare Exeter College with Brasenose College. Firstly, the job title for the person in charge, for instance, is different in Exeter and Brasenose. The principal is called 'Rector' in Exeter while he or she is called 'Principal' in Brasenose. You can see present and former Rectors' portraits on the wall of the dimly lit dining hall at Exeter College.

Secondly, in the Junior Common Room (JCR) in Brasenose College, there are many luxurious sofas, a large TV, vending machines for drinks and snacks, billiards, and a huge Jenga game by the fireplace. Students probably spend a relaxing time there with their friends. On the other hand, JCR in Exeter College looked much simpler with only vending machines, some sofas and a TV.

Thirdly, I would like to introduce famous Oxonians from Exeter and Brasenose. Oxonians are present students or former students of Oxford University⁸⁾. Oxford University has produced many important persons all over the world. 26 British Prime Ministers graduated from the University. David Cameron, who has been British Prime Minister since 2010, graduated from Brasenose College.

To take another example, many novelists were educated at the University too. You can still see J. R. R. Tolkien's name in the Exeter College register which is kept in the college library (see Figure 5). It is needless to say that he is the author of best-selling books *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*. In addition, Exeter College produced another novelist Philip Pullman. He made the setting of *Northern Lights*, the first book of *His Dark Materials* trilogy, Exeter College. If you enter the Senior Common Room (SCR) in Exeter College, you might be excited to see the exact place



Figure 3: The Main Entrance, the Chapel and Front Quadrangle in Exeter College

Lyra, the main character in the book, hid at the beginning of the story.

4 Traditional Campus Life in Oxford

4.1 The Porters' Lodge

Generally speaking, there is no sign at the gate of a college, which makes you walk around the street for a long time and finally ask people where the college you are looking for is. If you manage to get there, you will open the thick heavy wooden door. And then, you will see 'the Porters' Lodge' at the entrance. It is a place where security guards who are called 'porters' are working. They are in charge of 'the safety and security' of the college⁹⁾.



Figure 5: The Library in Exeter College



Figure 4: High Street Gate of Brasenose College

In contrast with the old and traditional things preserved in the colleges, an up-to-date security system is used in Oxford. They use swipe keys or fobs to open doors of the gate, the buildings, or the computer room so that strangers cannot sneak in, especially during the night. When I stayed at Exeter College, my hall of residence was in a building outside the college. Although it was located just across the street from the gate, it was difficult for me to understand where it was immediately. Then a porter showed me the door of the building on the screen of CCTV. It seemed that it was monitored for 24 hours a day.

Lastly, Oxford has tourists from all over the world. Even when colleges are closed to visitors, it is likely that porters are kind enough to allow you to take some pictures near the lodge where you can see a beautiful view of historical buildings and the quad. In most cases, they are friendly and generous.

4.2 The Dining Hall

Have you ever seen the Great Hall in any Harry Potter films? You can see its model in the dining hall in Christ Church, one of the 38 colleges in Oxford University. It is the most famous dining hall in Oxford. Many tourists visit it, although its ceiling does not reflect the weather nor are there any floating candles in the air as in the films! The staircase which is exactly the same as in a Harry Potter film will take you to the dining hall. Inside the hall, you will see three long rows of tables where students eat. Behind them is 'High Table' for teachers and their guests. It is set on a dais at the end of the dining hall¹⁰⁾. You might have seen

one in the film too.

Each college has its own dining hall (see Figures 6 and 7). It has a high ceiling and is dimly lit only with the sunshine through the stained glasses of the windows in the daytime and lights or candles on the tables in the evening. Therefore, when it is cloudy, the hall is a little dark. On the walls, you can see portraits of important people who are connected with the college.

The system of serving meals seems to be different in colleges. For instance, Exeter College and Brasenose College had different systems in many ways. At Exeter College, breakfast and lunch was self-service, and a two-course dinner (main course and dessert) was served every evening. We had a choice for lunch: (1) at the undercroft bar, where we ordered a panini or sandwich with juice, soup, and a small bag of crisps or (2) at the dining hall, where we had a cold buffet. Tea and coffee were served after every meal and at the break time between morning lectures. Tea-making facilities were in every room for students. On the other hand, at Brasenose College, we had a served dinner once a week. For lunch and dinner, we usually queued up in the kitchen to be served.

4.3 Historical Buildings

The architecture in Oxford is amazingly beautiful. Most buildings in this medieval town are made of limestone, which gives the landscape harmony. Oriel windows in Exeter College which are facing to Turl Street are beautiful. You can see many kinds of gargoyles on the walls of the buildings (see Figure 8). Even iron fences or water pipes are decorative in Oxford. If you are lucky enough, you may encounter actors on a movie set which is being shot in a college.

There is a sundial in some colleges. For example, there is one in Old Quad in Brasenose College. Moreover, on the walls of the buildings you might find some shields in order to thank the families who funded the college.

You might also see chalk drawings on the walls. ‘The only graffiti permitted on Oxford college walls celebrate victories over rival colleges’ boat crews’¹¹⁾. Here is a picture of one of them (see Figure 9).



Figure 6: The Dining Hall in Exeter College



Figure 7: High Table in Brasenose College



Figure 8: Gargoyles on the Wall

In addition to the stained glasses in the dining hall, you can see beautiful stained glass in the chapel (see Figures 10 and 11). In summer, plays or concerts are held in the college chapel or garden. When I stayed at Exeter College, a Shakespearean play and a medieval music concert were held. I was surprised that the beautiful chapel was unexpectedly a meeting point of the fire drill at Exeter College.

Inside the college, they have their own gardens. For example, in Exeter College, there are Fellows' Garden and Rector's Garden, both of which are full of greenery and flowers. Especially, Fellows' Garden in Exeter College has a fantastic view. You can see the Radcliffe Camera and the Gothic windows of the Divinity School in the Bodleian Library. Moreover, there is a small pond. This might be why I saw a duck with her ducklings in a bush in Exeter College. However, they needed somebody's help to pass through the doors to get to the bush in Front Quadrangle or the pond in Fellows' Garden.

The words 'quad' or 'quadrangle' mean a square layout of the buildings that New College, one of the oldest colleges in Oxford, first used and now is the standard of a building layout. The square garden surrounded by the buildings is called a 'quad' or 'quadrangle'. Each college has square gardens such as Old Quad and New Quad in Brasenose College and Front Quadrangle and Margary Quadrangle in Exeter College.

Generally speaking, you are not allowed to sit or walk on the grass in a quad even without a sign saying 'Keep off the grass'. This is why lawns remain beautiful in Oxford. However, it is surprising that students at Brasenose College



Figure 9: Graffiti on the Wall in Brasenose

are allowed to use New Quad from 12:30 to 20:30. I saw some students sitting happily on the lawn with their friends. One day, there was a tent on the lawn to hold a wedding party. Furthermore, I saw a squirrel secretly eating grass in New Quad in the evening. He lives in a tree in a small garden called Deer Park.

A librarian at the Bodleian Library said that it was difficult to make a balance between preserving the historical architecture and having a modern life. Although the inside building is modernised to some extent, it is not possible to build a lift everywhere to carry heavy books. Likewise, there are no lifts in halls of residence but are steep stairs in Exeter College and Brasenose College.



Figure 10: The Stained Glasses near High Table in Exeter College



Figure 11: The Chapel in Exeter College

Generally speaking, there is no air conditioning in the classrooms or halls of residence in colleges. As far as I know, only Saskatchewan Lecture Theatre, the largest meeting room in Exeter College was equipped with air conditioning. All the 60 participants of the summer course took a morning lecture there. Apart from this, we suffered from the heat because it was an unusually hot summer in Oxford in 2013. I needed to keep the window and the curtain in my room open to feel the breeze even during the night. Nevertheless, an old lady who took us an official guided tour to the town said that there was no need to equip the colleges with air conditioners just because it was very hot once in 500 years. Compared with the University's long history, our problem seemed to be nothing.

4.4 Ceremonial Clothing

Ceremonial clothing today is almost the same as that of medieval times¹²⁾. This is historically proved by two riots in Oxford in 1209 and 1248. Those riots are called 'town-gown' riots and the first one resulted in the birth of Cambridge University¹³⁾. The fighting was between people in the town and those who wore gowns in the University.

Let us look at what students wear at the present day. On formal occasions, students need to wear a gown and 'sub fusc' clothing which is 'black trousers or skirt, white shirt, and a white bowtie or black ribbon'¹⁴⁾. For example, when they attend a degree ceremony at the Sheldonian Theatre, they must wear full academic dress including the uniform cap (see Figure 12). I saw graduates throw their caps while they were taking group photos at Exeter College. I also saw



Figure 12: Students in Gowns

the Rector wearing a black gown with a red trim which was apparently different from that of students.

When students take exams at the Examination Schools, they need to pin a flower to their gown: a white carnation for the first exam, a pink one for the second exam, and the red one for the last exam¹⁵⁾. The flower pinned to a gown will tell you which exam they are taking. It is interesting that the colour of the flowers changes depending on the exam. It is said that students' effort or blood turns a white flower into a red one. A woman who just graduated from Merton College told me that the price of the flowers is higher during the exams.

5 Conclusion

The more I learn about the history of the town and the University, the more I like Oxford. I was amazed that some traditions or customs come from the University and that they have not changed over time.

People in Oxford are friendly. The staff members whom I met at colleges in Oxford seemed to be proud of being a member of their college. They knew well about the history of their college. They were very kind and polite even to short-term students like us. In addition, local people were nice too. Every time we asked them questions for the treasure hunt, they kindly taught us what they knew. Oxford is a good place to visit as a tourist as well as to study as a student.

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